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Reinecke, J., Arnold, D. G., & Palazzo, G. (2016). *Qualitative Methods in Business Ethics, Corporate Responsibility, and Sustainability Research*. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 26, xiii–xxii.

## **From the Editors**

### **Qualitative Methods in Business Ethics, Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability Research**

The number and influence of qualitative research articles has been growing across top-tier management journals (Bartunek et al., 2006; Bluhm et al., 2011). *Business Ethics Quarterly* explicitly welcomes qualitative submissions (e.g., Peifer, 2015), but has published few such articles in recent years despite the fact that they comprise approximately 18% of the 300+ annual submissions the journal receives. This does not reflect a bias against qualitative methods on the part of the editors, or the idea that qualitative methods are less well suited than quantitative or purely theoretical articles to explore questions of business ethics, corporate responsibility, and sustainability. On the contrary, qualitative methods are well poised to understand and explain complex and messy ethical phenomena. For this reason, the editors seek to increase high-quality qualitative scholarship in *Business Ethics Quarterly*. To help facilitate this end, additional, experienced qualitative methods scholars have been appointed to the editorial leadership team and to the editorial review board to help mentor submitters to develop their qualitative manuscripts. However, qualitative researchers also face a number of challenges in getting their research published, including the need to transparently demonstrate the quality and rigour of qualitative methods deployed. The purpose of this editorial is to provide guidance to qualitative scholars seeking to submit their work to *Business Ethics Quarterly*. While much of this guidance applies to qualitative research in general, we would first like to outline what qualitative methods have to offer for business ethics, corporate responsibility, and sustainability scholarship.

## **Why qualitative methods in business ethics research?**

The strength of qualitative research is typically seen as theory elaboration and theory generation rather than theory testing. This is particularly valuable for examining novel or emergent questions in business ethics, where no or little extant theory exists from which to deduce testable research hypotheses. As qualitative research typically proceeds inductively from data to theory, it can explore domains and questions where quantitative research would struggle to formulate hypotheses or find sufficient data. With the changing role of business in society (Scherer, Palazzo, & Baumann, 2006), the context for studying business ethics is transforming quickly. Businesses are facing a host of new, epochal challenges, such as the need to uphold justice and human rights in global value chains spreading across national borders (Kobrin, 2009; Cragg, Arnold, & Muchlinski, 2012; Gilbert, Rasche, & Waddock, 2011), deal with climate change and sustainability (DesJardins, 2016), realize the potential new business models to address global poverty and income inequality (Arnold, 2013), and ensure the well-being of employees in changing worlds of work. Business ethicists have unique capacity to start addressing the problems and challenges these new phenomena entail even if they do not (yet) have ready-made theories available that would be required for deductive analysis.

Second, and relatedly, qualitative researchers are uniquely placed to track novel phenomena in “real time” as they occur. This can focus on the “in vivo” processes of developing organizational responses to ethical challenges or generating meanings of new practices in the context in which they emerge. For instance, it is not clear how businesses will implement new reporting requirements such as integrated reporting or practice human rights due diligence in a company’s multi-tiered supply chain. Rather than retrospectively focusing on the outcomes of such reporting, qualitative observation can track the processes of how

actors make sense of these new business challenges.

Moreover, business ethicists cannot afford to ignore under-researched topics of great ethical import because reliable data is hard to obtain. Data limitations may seriously limit the ability of quantitative researchers to examine areas such as human rights violations in opaque and fragmented supply chains or business practice in least-developed countries. To illustrate, in the Bangladesh ready-made garment sector, which has been bedevilled by a series of deadly disasters culminating in the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse killing over 1,200 workers, scholars are still struggling to determine even the most rudimentary statistics such as the number of factories (Labowitz & Baumann-Pauly, 2015). There is a need for business ethicists to get their “hands dirty” in the field to better understand why unethical practices prevail in the contexts and what might prevent them.

Finally, qualitative methods are typically underpinned by an interpretive approach to social science. This can offer a more contextual understanding of business ethics from the vantage point of the complex and pluralistic reality of the actors themselves (Treviño, et al. 2014), rather than understanding business ethics as a domain of abstract and theoretical knowledge existing objectively and independently from empirical knowledge. Thus, by giving a “voice” to the participants, this views business ethics through the lens of the participants’ perceptions of his or her experiences rather than through the lens of abstract categories and concepts imposed by the researchers, including the normative assumptions that are always already inscribed into them.

As qualitative examination often occurs in the natural setting of the organization, this allows understanding what ethics means within a certain cultural and organizational context. Through deep immersion in the context and empathy with participants, qualitative methods can capture emic, or experience-near understanding, that is, situated knowledge (Geertz, 1983) of how individuals, teams, and organizations define and negotiate what is ethical or not

in the social situation under study and how this may change over time. Such a stance also allows researchers to change and adapt research design and data gathering in response to changes of how the research situation unfolds. Researchers can more reflexively focus on “the unanticipated and unexpected – things that puzzle the researcher” in the field, and use this as an emergent strategy for opening up novel research directions and eventually theorization (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007: 1266).

### **What is high-quality qualitative scholarship?**

Many scholars agree that significant scholarly contributions should be assessed in terms of theoretical contribution, rigorous methods, good writing, and also whether or not the contribution offers “interesting” insights (Davis, 1971; Alvesson & Karreman, 2007). While articles can be theoretically or empirically interesting, *Business Ethics Quarterly* particularly encourages articles that are also morally interesting. That is, we welcome (but not exclusively) research that is based on normative motivations and normative implications. The implicit or explicit assumption of most mainstream management research, for example, is that firm profit maximization is the end of business and that business practices must be justified in relation to that end. In business ethics research the operative assumption is that economic value is one of many important values that merit the consideration of scholars and that economic values must be weighted against other values, such as justice, fairness, respect for persons, legal compliance, environmental sustainability, and integrity, in markets and in business. This, however, does not mean we welcome moralizing judgments, ethical lecturing, or biased research. Instead, and perhaps more so than in other research, to be able to make normative claims and recommendations convincingly requires scholars to demonstrate the validity and credibility of their study’s conclusions, and convince readers that their results are valid and based on appropriate and rigorous methods.

A common tension faced by all qualitative researchers alike is that they lack the same sort of templates and standardized ways of conducting research and analysis that quantitative researchers enjoy (Pratt, 2009). Qualitative methodology is a broad umbrella term for a diversity of data sources (e.g., interviews, textual and visual data, ethnography, and more recently netnography and video observation), ways to analyse them (e.g., grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative analysis), and different epistemological/ontological commitments (e.g., realist, feminist, social constructivist, poststructuralist), which may lead to different standards of evaluating qualitative manuscripts. For instance, qualitative researchers working in critical or interpretive traditions reject neopositivist assumptions about validity. They view data as constructions, created through interaction between the researcher and the research setting rather than accurate, if imperfect, representations of reality (Alvesson & Kaerremann, 2007).

The editors of *Business Ethics Quarterly* seek to respect the diversity of approaches of both authors and reviewers, yet certain challenges re-occur across different qualitative approaches. Thus, the purpose of this editorial is not to provide a one-size-fits-all “how to” guide for conducting qualitative research, but offer guidance on how to meet the expectations that a qualitative researcher is likely to encounter: 1) motivating why the study merits scholarly attention, 2) deploying rigorous qualitative methods, 3) providing convincing empirical support to theoretical claims, 4) showing sufficient empirical data in the writing, 5) managing the interface of data analysis and theory-building, and 6) demonstrating how results may be transferrable to other situations. In general, the author(s) need to demonstrate the fit between research questions, empirical observations, and theoretical claims.

1) The very *first* challenge of course is to convince readers that the study merits scholarly attention. Here, it is important to keep the audience in mind when submitting an

article to *Business Ethics Quarterly*. Reviewers are likely to be editorial board members or regularly readers and/or authors of articles published in *Business Ethics Quarterly*. They will like to know how the study relates to business ethics, or the related domains of corporate responsibility and sustainability, and improves our knowledge of business ethics, and expect you to connect with theoretical or ethical debates in the journal to show the relevance of the manuscript to the *Business Ethics Quarterly* readership.

Researchers can thereby motivate their research primarily in two different ways: by taking as their starting point either a theoretical paradigm or an empirical problem existing in the world. To be sure, either approach should aim at generating knowledge that ultimately informs important questions in business ethics. Yet, a problem-driven or paradigm-driven orientation shapes the way the article is framed.

A paradigm-driven article derives research questions internally from within a theoretical paradigm, such as institutional theory, and aims at building cumulatively upon it. Here it is important to identify gaps or “empty spaces” in the existing literature, but also explain why it is important to fill them. Lounsbury and Beckman (2014) argue that paradigm-driven research is useful to place our findings in a theoretical frame and explain how our empirical observations relate to and build on each other.

In contrast, problem-driven research starts by identifying an empirical problem encountered in the world. A problem-driven research design lends itself to normative motivations such as understanding the reasons for unethical business practices or motivators for ethical behaviour. Some therefore argue that it is more suitable to placing management knowledge in the service of understanding real-life problems and grand challenges such as corporate accountability in complex and fragmented global supply chains, ethical implications of new employment practices, and business responses to poverty or climate change (Davis, 2014). While it is still important to develop a theoretical frame that could help

understand and explain the phenomenon or problem, it is the latter that drives the choice of a theoretical frame.

2) A second challenge is to clearly articulate and utilize established research methods. Because the methods are qualitative does not mean they should not be rigorous, nor does it mean that any set of interviews or case-like description of a particular problem or issue will meet expectations for methodological rigor. Far too often the editors have seen authors simply make-up a methodology, or refer loosely to a type of method without rigorously deploying the method themselves. One of the basic questions asked by the editors about qualitative methods submissions at desk review is “Does the submission rigorously deploy an appropriate research method?” If the answer is “no,” the article is desk rejected from *Business Ethics Quarterly*. Specific methods might include participant observation, structured interviews, content analysis, or archival methods and historical analysis. Regardless of the methods deployed, researchers must use best practices in rigorously applying the methodology. It is perhaps worth noting that a brief, original case study (e.g., a description of a recent corporate scandal) can be utilized to ground theory development without rising to the level of qualitative research. Within moral philosophy there is a long established tradition of using hypothetical examples to ground theory and in *Business Ethics Quarterly* examples can be either hypothetical or actual examples of ethical problems. Such work should be submitted under the “Theory Only” category rather than the “Qualitative Methods” category in Scholar One.

A comment the qualitative researcher will typically get from reviewers is to “better explain your methods.” The task at hand is to transparently demonstrate a logical chain of evidence from raw data to theory, in other words, show how theorization is embedded in empirical material. To be sure, this can be a challenge given the messy reality of field



research and the often iterative, nonlinear processes of data analysis that is also driven by the prior knowledge, interest, values as well as intuition and creativity of the researcher. In qualitative studies, there is therefore more than one possible way of understanding a phenomenon, and the task is to convince reviewers why the chosen explanation and data-theory is an appropriate one while maintaining an awareness of possible alternatives.

The emergence of some templates, such as Eisenhardt's (1989) method of comparative case study grounded in the positivist tradition, or the Gioia methodology grounded in the realist tradition (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) can provide guidance through greater standardization and codification. At the same time, the strength of qualitative data is often seen as generating more innovative, less formulaic research. Thus, an alternative avenue to using a standardized recipe is to explicitly acknowledge creative inspiration in qualitative research, by describing theory development as a process of "disciplined imagination" (Weick, 1989). This would productively use dialectic tensions that may eventually enable a "conceptual leap" from data to theory (Klag & Langley, 2013). One mistake sometimes made is that qualitative researchers claim to follow a standard template or commonly cited approach without actually using its procedures correctly. For instance, researchers routinely claim to use "grounded theory" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) while doing so only ceremoniously or seeking to explain through "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) while not actually offering "thick description."

In any case, rather than following descriptive, standard protocols in describing every step in detail and at length, it is more important to focus on the most critical, unusual or theory-driven steps through which the core theoretical insights were derived at. And rather than writing up the analytical protocol as if qualitative enquiry was a linear, mechanical and straight-forward process, it may actually increase credibility to transparently acknowledge how initial analytical choices were ill-suited and were adjusted in the analytical process

(Peifer, 2015) or how multiple iterations led to revising earlier interpretations.

3) A third and critical challenge that the qualitative researcher faces is to convince his or her readers that he or she has systematically collected sufficient high-quality data to explain the phenomenon and answer the research question. “Is there enough empirical support to ground theoretical claims?” is one of the first questions editors and reviewers will ask themselves when assessing whether a submission has the potential to be published. In fact, displaying high-quality data can make the critical difference between desk-rejecting or sending the submission out for review even if other aspects such as analysis or theorization requires further polishing. To convince reviewers about the quality and credibility of data sources, it is essential to provide, as a first step, a comprehensive and transparent overview over the amount, timing and extent of data collection methods, which can also be summarized in data tables.

There is no single, objective answer as to how many interviews or hours of observation are sufficient. Few, in-depth interviews with key respondents may provide focused insights into a particular niche area of research. But broad claims about, for instance, field-level changes may necessitate stronger evidence from more respondents representing multiple perspectives. While researchers may have the cooperation of an organization which allows for sufficient data to be gathered in a short period of time, impactful fields research can often require years of data gathering prior to analysis (Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015). What is important is that authors explain why their methodological choices of case selection, level of analysis, or data collection are appropriate and sufficiently rigorous to answer their specific research question. A common complaint by reviewers is that authors overclaim, that is, they make theoretical claims that their data are unable to support. Even if the available data is rich, it may not provide the necessary evidence that theoretical arguments are valid.

Consider the mismatch between levels of analysis: Field-level data is unsuitable for explaining an organizational-or individual-level phenomenon and vice versa. In the review processes authors may be encouraged to re-consider whether their theoretical claims are too broad and whether narrowing them down may yield more focused and credible arguments.

Rigour may also involve specifying the researcher's own position in the field as a way of demonstrating reflexivity and self-examination. As business ethics research may be motivated by normative considerations it is important to delineate the researcher's relationship with the field (cf. Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993). How did ways of entering the field, forming relationships with informants, and navigating the field work shape the research process, not as an undesirable bias but inevitable part of the interpretative process (Alvesson & Skoeldberg, 2009)?

Finally, rigour may also involve critically questioning one's own results. For instance, through triangulation the qualitative researcher can assess the same phenomenon from the angle of different data sources, such as both documents and interviews, to determine whether they point to convergent or divergent findings. Convergence can increase credibility in the initial interpretation while confrontation with diverging findings can challenge researchers to consider alternative, and maybe more interesting interpretations.

4) A fourth challenge the qualitative researcher may often hear from his or her reviewers is that the author "tells" too much and does not "show" enough data, which refers to the way the data is used in writing up the research account. While the empirical detail may seem rather obvious to an author who might have spent months in the field collecting the data, the same cannot be said of readers. Thus, reviewers typically want to "see" some raw data in order to be confident in the empirical validity of the authors' claims. In addition, research findings that are presented in terms of conceptual categories, analytical terms,

processes and mechanisms may seem overly abstract and “dry.” This misses out on the opportunity to convey and leverage the great richness of qualitative data, which is its greatest appeal! An intriguing, well-crafted empirical narrative can go a long way in bringing to life the studied phenomenon and thereby immediately making the article more interesting. Vivid descriptions, short vignettes, illustrative quotes, or surprising elements can hook and engage the reader.

Moreover, an overly dispassionate depiction of data in the text as if they were objective, brute facts presented as “truth” may seem at odds with a qualitative research agenda that typically recognizes that knowledge claims are constructed rather than revealed. In ethnographic work for instance, alternative criteria such as authenticity of “having been there” and conveying first-hand experience, plausibility of the account, and a critical perspective that challenges prevailing assumptions and theories, are considered important to producing impactful scholarship (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993). However, it is by no means an easy task to convey empirical richness while at the same time staying narrowly focused on the main insights needed to support the theorization. One can get carried away with presenting a fascinating empirical story, and forgetting the need to provide a theoretical account that provides the basis for the theoretical contribution.

This points to the opposite problem, namely when qualitative manuscripts are overly descriptive. Describing at length accurately observed detail, without offering a compelling interpretation that lends theoretical weight to the account, typically fails to meet the expectation of offering a theoretical explanation. This points to the fifth challenge – where is the place for theory in qualitative research?

5) The previous point highlights the challenges that occur on the interface of data analysis and theory-building: A good article has to provide a good balance between rich descriptions

and data analysis and theorization. In their narrative, successful qualitative articles normally have two places that focus on theory and theory-building. In a first place, researchers have to embed their conceptual story in the existing literature regardless of whether they follow a paradigm-driven or problem-driven approach (see point 1 above). Answering a simple question can facilitate this outcome: What do we already know about a particular phenomenon and what do we not yet understand sufficiently? Here, theory has the important role to foreshadow the empirical analysis and thus embed the article, its data and its research question(s) in an existing *theoretical* debate to which it is meant to make a contribution. The existing debates should be tailored in a way that informs the article's narrative structure.

More challenging for the author(s), when it comes to theory building, is the second place where a qualitative article utilizes theory: The theorization of data and the theoretical contribution that results analysis of the data. Here, the research account authors present might be too descriptive and not sufficiently theorized. When analysing their qualitative data, scholars search for patterns which they typically code, aggregate, and theorize. Very often, qualitative manuscripts do not make this third and important step. They look for patterns, organize them (e.g. temporally or in types) and stop there. This, however, is not yet a theoretical contribution, but just a description or organization of data with key words. Qualitative researchers need to go further and use their findings as a basis for explanation and theorization. Thus, they need to offer not just a description but a "theorized storyline". While there are many ways of doing so, but no ultimate "recipe", Golden-Biddle and Locke (2007) suggest that authors can structure their writing through different "telling-showing" sequences in which researchers intersperse showing their data with telling their theoretical significance, thereby navigating the tension between "telling" (= theorization) and "showing" (= description).

By theorizing findings, scholars look beyond their particular case. Sometimes, for

instance, qualitative articles end where quantitative articles start: by formulating some propositions. Scholars have to take the perspective of their peers who are engaged in the theoretical debate, presented as foreshadowing the research project of the manuscript. Formulating propositions is one, but not the only valid form of theorizing findings. A theorization might for instance look for a process or propose categories that can be used by other scholars to analyse different cases or phenomena. Theorizations go one level deeper than descriptions can do and they reconnect the manuscript's narrative to the foreshadowing theory: What is it that we better understand because of this analysis in the context of a particular theoretical debate?

6) The ability to offer insights beyond their particular case is related to the final challenge: qualitative researchers may be reproached that their findings based on single or small n-studies and are not generalizable to a larger population, or in other words, lack external validity. In response, qualitative researchers may argue that they do not hold a statistical view of generalizability based on frequencies as in the positivist tradition. However, to avoid the pitfall of "case-bound" theorization where results "only" explain processes that occur in the situation under study, it is thus important to derive more general implications from the research.

Qualitative researchers have advocated alternative ways of demonstrating the transferability (rather than generalizability) of qualitative research, including analytical generalization (Yin, 2010), mechanism-based theorizing (Hedstroem & Swedberg, 1998) or heuristic generalization (Tsoukas, 2009). These provide different avenues of how qualitative scholars can show how their results can be applicable to and thereby inform processes in similar situations. It is also here that business ethicists can point to the normative implications that their work entails

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we reiterate our encouragement of qualitative submissions to *Business Ethics Quarterly*. As the quality and rigour of qualitative methods is a frequent reason why manuscripts do not get published in the journal, the purpose of this editorial is to focus on some of the challenges that qualitative authors encounter most frequently and guide them in their use and writing up of qualitative methods. To be sure, this does not provide an exhaustive discussion of the use of qualitative methods in business ethics, corporate responsibility, and sustainability research, but we hope it will provide a useful starting point for authors and facilitate a successful outcome.

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